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‘Providential Discourse’ Reconsidered: The Case of the Delft Thunderclap (1654)

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Scholarly research has described religious reactions to early modern disasters as ‘providential discourse’, in line with the theological term Divine Providence, and has claimed that the so-described ‘peccatogenic’ perception (from the Latin word ‘peccatum’ or sin) prevails in this discourse. This article reconsiders the concept of providential discourse in two respects. Firstly, its diversity is highlighted. Secondly, it argues that providential discourse, rhetorically charged as it was, often aimed to evoke collective emotions in its audiences, such as compassion with those affected. This reconsideration is based on the analysis of narratively framed responses to the Delft Thunderclap (1654).

KEYWORDS: Providential discourse, disaster, delft thunderclap, explosion, fire, rhetoric, emotions, compassion.

Introduction

‘Alas, how many misfortunes oppress my suffering heart! How many disasters press the tears from my eyes!’

(Romeyn de Hooghe, 1675)¹

In an illustrated broadsheet from 1675, the female personification of the Netherlands is seen falling as she raises her clasped hands to heaven. ‘Help us Lord, we are sinking’, reports the caption of this central scene. The picture shows a lamenting Miss Netherlands in crisis. Behind her we see the devastation of a cathedral, a sinking ship, armed soldiers pursuing people in flight and, last but not least, a cataclysmic flood forcing the distressed lady to her knees. Eight smaller pictures surround the central scene. Seven of these represent various natural and man-made disasters which tormented the Netherlands, starting with the Year of Disaster 1672 and continuing until 1675, the year of publication of the broadsheet. The eighth picture, with the caption ‘Restoration of Hope and Peace’,

shows Miss Netherlands gradually getting back on her feet again, assisted by two other allegorical figures, while a man with a shield fends the enemy off. The accompanying text attributes the successive disasters which have beset the Netherlands and driven her to this lamentable position to her own (i.e. the population's) degenerate and sinful behaviour in terms of luxury, arrogance and weakness of religious faith.²

The kind of explanation for the catastrophes which had devastated the Dutch Republic in the 1670s, as provided by the broadsheet from 1675, could easily be extended to many similar cases from across seventeenth-century Europe. Together they supply a religiously informed discourse of early modern crises, a discourse which represents the general and widespread belief in a world ruled by an almighty, providential God. In his major synthesis of research into global crisis and the societal impact of the climate in the seventeenth century, Geoffrey Parker (2013) for instance cites a Spanish Jesuit who, living in the Philippines, reacted to the simultaneous eruption of three volcanoes in 1641 by expressing that 'Divine Providence wishes to show us something, perhaps to warn us of some approaching catastrophe, which our sins so deserve, or the loss of some territory, because God is angry'.³ Such considerations, attributing disasters in the broad sense of crises (including war, military defeat, famine, floods, pestilence, etc.) to human misconduct or sin, reflect the peccatogenic perception. This perception, as Parker alleges, dominated providential discourse.⁴ Likewise, other researchers of historical disasters consider the peccatogenic outlook as prevailing in the religiously based pre-modern discourse.⁵

Providential discourse on disasters will be reconsidered in the following. My first aim is to analyse it closely to bring its diversity to the fore. Secondly, I will argue that providential discourse, rhetorically charged as it was, often aimed to evoke emotions in its audience, such as compassion with the community struck by the disaster. On the basis of these emotional appeals, I will refer to the field of the history of emotions and argue that providential discourse constructed 'emotional communities'.

My reconsideration will be based on an analysis of narratively framed Dutch responses to a local disaster from the latter half of the seventeenth century: the Delft Thunderclap (1654). The term 'narratively framed' refers to the common practice of framing disasters into existing narratives.⁶ This practice conceals the psychological urge to make sense of the chaos and devastation which inevitably resulted from any type of disaster. Existing narratives integrated each new disaster into ongoing history and memory and thereby strengthened the faith in divine providence and cosmic order.

The diversity of providential discourse on the Delft Thunderclap (1654)

In the late morning of 12 October 1654, a large explosion struck the city of Delft. The province's central gunpowder magazine, located in a former monastery and containing around 80,000 to 90,000 lb of powder, had burst into flame. A quarter of the city was devastated, and although the exact number of victims is unknown, it has been estimated that the explosion and the fire which followed caused at least 54 deaths (among them Carel Fabritius, one of Delft's foremost painters) and injured thousands of people. Hundreds



FIGURE 1 *The explosion of the powder magazine in Delft, 12 October 1654*. Painting (oil on panel) by Egbert Lievensz. van der Poel (1621–1664), who lived in Delft at the time of the explosion. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Online Collection.



FIGURE 2 *A view of Delft after the explosion of 1654*. Painting (oil on panel) by Egbert Lievensz. van der Poel (1621–1664). The National Gallery London, Online Collection.

of houses were razed or damaged, the two major churches lost their stained-glass windows, large trees were sheared off to stumps and a deep crater marked the location of the underground powder depot (Figs. 1 and 2). This explosion, which was said to have been

heard as far away as the island of Texel (seventy miles north of Delft) became known as ‘The Delft Thunderclap’ (‘De Delftse Donderslag’). The exact cause has never been identified. Perhaps, as was speculated at that time, sparks had escaped from a lantern. The truth would never be known as the person carrying the lantern that morning – a clerk who had been charged with fetching a few pounds of the powder – did not survive.⁷

Shortly afterwards the first public responses started to appear in printed broadsheets and pamphlets. In this early discourse on the Delft disaster, the explanation of the explosion in terms of God’s punishment of sinful men was, of course, prominent. This peccatogenic outlook was stressed insistently in the penitential sermon by the Delft minister Petrus de Witte, entitled *Delft Thunderclap, or a short address to the mourning congregation of Delft. Visited by a terrible judgement of God [...]*.⁸ De Witte reminds his fellow believers that Delft had already been castigated by the hand of God with a fire in 1536⁹ and calls upon them to realize that, again, nothing other than their own sinfulness caused the recent explosion. Born guilty as all humans are and generally predestined for sin, he argues, the Delft population had increasingly degenerated into collective sinfulness and weakness of faith since the Eighty Years’ War ended.¹⁰ No wonder the wrathful God had punished the city suddenly and terribly with the infernal fire of the explosion: ‘Our sins, our sins have directed the sparks and matchsticks to the powder [...] The sins light God’s wrath, here and in the hereafter, in the infernal fire. O gruesome sins!’¹¹ But, as we will see in the next section, De Witte did not leave his audience in the distress of sheer remorse. He also offered hope for the future and evoked compassion.

The (rather extensive) pamphlet which included De Witte’s sermon ends with a poem entitled *On the explosion of the Holland magazine at Delft*. It expresses the same peccatogenic perception in terms of a straightforward lesson:

Your punishment through the gunpowder must teach you and us all, That he, who does not exterminate the weed of sin from his heart, Is easily eradicated by the force of the Lord.¹²

However, the poet Hendrik Bruno (son of a Reformed minister and working in Hoorn as a teacher),¹³ evidently zealously intent on exposing Delft’s collective sins, made the fatal mistake of explicitly including the city’s council by pointing at its wickedness:

God also struck your town hall, because the many coming there (I don’t mention the pious) are Full of lust for power, selfish interests, Full of hatred, full of envy, fraud, full of godless counsel.¹⁴

This stanza was considered highly abusive, as the city’s historian Dirk van Bleyswijck makes clear in his *Description of Delft* from 1667. Van Bleyswijck reprimands minister De Witte *post hoc* for having permitted Bruno’s poem to be printed at the end of his sermon. He also reports that it gave rise to many other anonymous poems, for instance, the one entitled *To the slanderous poem in the aftermath of the Delft Thunderclap, published by P. De Witt, minister at Delft [...]* *Antidote*.¹⁵ Bleyswijck’s disapproving comment, as well as the polemical debate he described, demonstrates that, politically, there were limits to providential discourse. If the government was openly included into a peccatogenic perception and consequently portrayed as sinful – as Bruno did – then corrective voices immediately emerged.

But the peccatogenic outlook was also perceived as disputable in its own right. Either its argument of strict predestination, or its rhetoric of dogmatic certainty with regard to divine providence, or both, were contested in other responses to the explosion.

By far the most explicit and polemical contestation was offered by *The Divine Trumpet over Holland, or the Gruesome Holland Thunderclap, which is an unexpected, short and sharp Godly address to all Reformed ministers of Holland, Zeeland and Friesland, through God's terrible judgement or God's thundering voice on 12 October 1654* [...]. Its author, Arnout van Geluwe, was a former Protestant citizen of Delft who had moved to Flanders, converted to Catholicism and had become a fervent spokesman of the Counter-Reformation.¹⁶ As the title of his response suggests, Van Geluwe explains and argues that the Delft disaster was not God's judgement on the citizens of Delft. Not they, but De Witte and other reformed ministers, who were misleading the populations of the northern provinces with their heresy, had inflamed God's wrath. In the form of a dialogue between 'The Catholic' and 'The Protestant', quoting and discussing De Witte's sermon extensively, Van Geluwe provides a critical theological comment mainly aimed at the sermon's core and basic argument: the doctrine of strict predestination. Through the Catholic, as well as through the Protestant, Van Geluwe puts forward forcefully that God is good and righteous, instead of cruel and tyrannical, and that He has created men in His image.¹⁷ In response the – increasingly doubtful – Protestant argues that if men were born in sin and were predestined to commit sins during their lifetimes, then of course 'we, poor earthworms' would not be able to resist 'God's eternal ordinance'. 'And that's why', as the Protestant continues, 'we laugh at our ministers when they preach that God will punish us for our sins. We say to them that they could spare the impossible effort of converting us, because we don't have the free will to repent [...].'¹⁸

Thereby reasoning and suggesting that the Delft Protestant community took De Witte's penitential message with a pinch of salt, the Catholic lay polemist Van Geluwe rejected the Reformed peccatogenic outlook on the Delft disaster. However, he simply replaced it with its Counter-Reformist counterpart: righteous divine judgement of the heretical northern ministers.

Other early responses to the Delft disaster represent perceptions which are distinct from De Witte's outlook and Van Geluwe's polemical reply as well.

According to the *Historical report of the miraculous and terrible explosion of the magazine, which occurred on the 12th of October, 1654, in Delft* [...] by the Amsterdam publisher, printmaker and writer Jan Philipsz Schabaelje, the Delft explosion was, as he paradoxically argues, the unprecedented recurrence of the recent fire in his former domicile De Rijk (6–7 January 1654),¹⁹ though he principally presented it as a terrible battle between the elements:

[...] here battled and tumbled the Elements, the Fire, the Air, the Earth [...], the Fire, that cannot live without air, did not want to be caught and enclosed [...], therefore everything had to burst, break and explode because of the violence that the Fire possesses by nature.²⁰

Men and women who had escaped from the blaze believed 'that Judgement Day had come', reports Schabaelje. Others, not directly in danger, but hearing the tremendous

noise and seeing everything plunged into smoke and dust, were convinced that the elements, along with the fabric of the whole world, had been turned upside down and 'that now the time had come that one had to account for one's deeds'.²¹ This perception, Schabaelje explains, 'is not so strange', because 'there is written *that the day of the Lord will come like a thief*, which is hurriedly and unexpectedly [...], *the heavens will pass away with a roar and the Elements will be destroyed by fire*, 2 Peter 3:10'. He continues:

Yes, let us freely believe that God (Who foresees all) makes happen such things as a warning for all people to turn to ourselves [...], to know the world, to live cautiously, not letting ourselves be misled by things that are worthless (although they show themselves with a shining appearance), things that are, indeed, as unstable as instability itself, although they are valued by our foolish imagination as mountains of steel.²²

Finally, he argues that both the fire disasters which occurred in Holland in 1654, first in De Rijp and then in Delft, served as a divine mirror, not only for those living in the direct vicinity and in Holland, but also for people in the other provinces. God wanted to wake up 'the sleepy hearts in the whole country, and to warn them not to lose the daylight of divine grace because of slumbering in sin'.²³

What can we deduce from this response to the Delft disaster? First, that it represents a perception without any allusion to predestination and retaliation by God (which accords with the fact that Schabaelje was a member of a Mennonite congregation).²⁴ Schabaelje considers the explosion as a battle of the elements and eventually interprets it as God's warning and corrective mirror. God reminded the people, as he argues, not to slumber in their attachment to the vanities of earthly life, but instead to focus on their inner selves with the Day of Judgment in mind. Second, Schabaelje avoids the compelling rhetoric of dogmatic certainty which characterizes De Witte's penitential sermon and De Geluwe's polemical dialogue against it. Instead, he explains why it is understandable that the eye and ear-witnesses of the explosion believed that they were experiencing Judgment Day (with its unexpected fury and fiery elements as everyone's biblically based reference). Moreover, his readers were invited to believe ('let us freely believe' / 'laet ons vryelick gelooven') that God had sent His warning sign to put that final day of judgement in men's minds and wake them up.

The Amsterdam poet Joost van den Vondel goes even further by acknowledging that in the case of the Delft explosion, God's providence is incomprehensible and unpredictable. To Vondel, no heavenly sign, no corrective morality, let alone any interpretation in terms of God's punitive retaliation against the people's sinfulness can be deduced from the horror and unexpectedness of Delft's destruction. The plano-broadsheet with his poem entitled *On the thunderstorm of the nation's gunpowder at Delft* (Amsterdam, 1654)²⁵ reflects on the disaster through a series of meditative contemplations addressed to the contemporary Amsterdam mayor and patron of poets and painters Joan Huydecoper van Maerseveen.²⁶ The poem's motto 'Plurima mortis imago' ('Death in various guises'; *Aeneid* II, 368) refers to the narrative of Troy's downfall, more specifically the passage in which Aeneas relives its devastation through war and fire. In the run-up to his main topic, the Delft explosion, Vondel has the mayor (and other readers of the poem) contemplate previous examples of devastating death through thunder and powder explosion. The first

example is Salmoneus. This proud king of Elis had imitated the thunder and lightning of Jupiter and was killed by him (*Aeneid* VI, 585–594).²⁷ However, Salmoneus had not been able to penetrate Pluto's underworld. This was achieved by – second example – the monk Berthold Schwartz, who 'fathomed Nature, and broke open all the caves of her bosom'. Schwartz (alleged inventor of gun powder) had discovered the fatal blending of 'saltpetre, carbon and sulphur' that 'uproots the bottom of the earth, mixes the living with the dead, and seems to dominate heaven'. The third and final example that Vondel has the mayor reflect on is the Vesuvius eruption in the year 79. This 'mountain of sulphur, that, never being put out, vomits its flames and sparks eternally' engulfed the 'famous descriptor of Nature' Plinius Secundus, while he was investigating it. Then Vondel continues, addressing the mayor anew:

Now you looked, here at Holland's soil,
 Vesuvius in its mouth.
 In Delft, where against style and order,
 Our powder, being changed into the country's enemy,
 Neither spares town hall, nor church,
 And digs the citizens' grave for Delft
 In rubble, human flesh and waves
 Of glowing ashes and glass.

The powder's devastating effects, described in the present tense ('spares', 'digs'), seem to occur here and now. The city 'stinks', it resembles

[...] a graveyard, sated with corpses,
 Crushed, truncated, ripped, scorched.
 A chaos, mixed up.
 A last day, full of deadly fears,
 And the moment of moments.

After this allusion to the Day of Judgement (cf. Schabaelje above), the poem concludes with a kind of universalized lamentation (again formulated in the present tense): 'Spend a century and Croesus' treasure on building, / One spark, one moment destroys a city'.²⁸ Vondel generalizes the Delft disaster in terms of unexpectedness and unpredictability instead of interpreting it as a warning sign from God, let alone as God's castigation of the city's sinfulness. Consequently, his response seems more in line with the classical idea of relentless, unpredictable divine indifference or the *divum inclementia* which caused Troy's fall (*Aeneid* 2, 602–603),²⁹ than with the contemporary belief in God's providence. This discrepancy was acceptable at the time. After all, Vondel's poem was addressed to mayor Huydecoper and included in Schabaelje's 'Historical report [...]' (1654), as well as in Van Bleyswijck's *Description of Delft* (1667).³⁰

So much for the diversity of providential discourse on the Delft Thunderclap (1654), as based on an analysis of early responses on this disaster.

The rhetoric of emotions: constructing ‘emotional communities’

‘Who does get tired of crying bitterly? The ruined city is weeping at you’, writes Vondel to mayor Huydecoper and, of course, the other readers of his poetic reflection.³¹ Schabaelje, quoting a citizen from Delft, strongly assures his contemporaries that ‘not anyone, I say not anyone, would be able to see this huge and unspeakable misery with dry eyes and without tears’.³² Minister De Witte insists on his audience’s feelings of remorse and commiseration by means of extensively describing the people’s injuries and disruption in detail and by quoting, for instance, the prophet Jeremiah’s lamentations on the destruction of Jerusalem.³³ The poet Hendrik Bruno appeals to the need for ‘real remorse’ (‘waer berouwen’) among all the citizens of ‘Holland’s free Republic’ (‘Hollandts vrye Staet’). De Geluwe, who dedicates his *Divine Trumpet over Holland* [...] to the individual magistracy members of Roeselare (Flanders), evokes compassion with the minority of Catholic fellow believers in Delft and, above all, indignation towards De Witte and his Reformed colleagues.³⁴

Responses to the Delft explosion apparently include emotional appeals to its audiences: they are induced to show, for instance, compassion with the city’s affected inhabitants through weeping and thus participating in collective mourning.

This section will contend that providential discourse on disasters (mainly represented by the previously discussed responses to the Delft disaster) is informed by, as I will call it, the rhetoric of emotions. The emotional appeals, rhetorically charged as they are, provide for social interconnectedness and for solidarity with the suffering people of the ruined city or region. Consequently, I will suggest that historical disaster research could be extended to the field of the history of emotion.

A substantial part of early modern responses to disasters is informed by what can be called the rhetoric of emotions. Sorrow, compassion and abhorrence are, for instance, frequently uttered or implied emotions. They are more or less dictated by the rhetorical (and poetic) genre of the lament or lamentation, as sometimes directly emerges from titles such as *Lament on the ruin of the imperial city of Aachen* (1656) *Lamentation on the horrible destruction of London* (1666), both poems by Vondel, or *The Londoners Lamentation*, as an anonymous English broadsheet ballad about the same disaster was entitled.³⁵ Biblical lamentations such as the prophet Jeremiah’s laments on the fall of Jerusalem also contributed to the genre’s notoriety and prestige.

The lamentation as a speech genre was articulated in contemporary rhetorical handbooks, for instance the *Commentatorium rhetoricorum sive oratorium institutionum libri sex* (1606, 1609, 1630, 1643) by Gerard Vossius, professor of rhetoric and Greek at Leiden University and the writer of several works on rhetoric and poetics. Under the heading ‘De lamentatoria’ Vossius determines, firstly, that laments bring calamities to the fore and amplify them so that others (i.e. the audience) are incited to compassion. Secondly, a lamentation can arouse hatred against the person who caused the evil and, finally, as Vossius makes clear, a lamentation can strike fear in the hearts of the audience, because it shows that what strikes one person can also happen to another.³⁶ Therefore, in order to move the audience to compassion with those affected, lamentations on disasters were

supposed to follow the rhetorical device of amplification, i.e. to expand upon details of destruction and distress.

Such moving particulars are indeed strikingly present in the responses on the Delft disaster which I discussed in the previous section. Moreover, they are directly linked with or bound up in strongly emotionally charged formulations which appeal to compassion. See, for example, the letter of the Delft citizen Schabaelje quotes in his *Historical report*:

Words fail to describe the suffering and distress here [...]. The crying here by the wife for her husband, the husband for his wife, the parents for their children, the children for their parents, the sister for her brother, the brother for his sister [...] is so deeply pitiful and regrettable, that a heart of stone and diamond would be moved to cry and weep for these lamentations. Indeed, even the cruellest Barbarians and Turks would not be able to see this sorrowful spectacle of sadness without sighing and with pain in their hearts. They would be distraught and completely beside themselves seeing this destruction of houses, this crushing, suffocation and wounding of so many people, including complete schools with children and young girls [...] Not anyone, I say not anyone would be able to see this huge and unspeakable misery with dry eyes and without tears, but instead would have to be moved to lament in his heart on all this suffering, these devastations, all these accumulated sorrows and insurmountable damage.³⁷

Obviously, the eyewitness and writer of the letter – and through him Schabaelje as well of course – aims at emotional persuasion: readers are confronted with realistic signs of suffering and more or less required to identify themselves with the suffering community and to react compassionately, both externally (tears and sighs) and internally (softening of the heart). Schabaelje makes an emotional benchmark explicit: anyone within and outside Delft must show compassion to its stricken citizens. Accordingly, on the basis of emotional persuasion the readers of his *Historical Report*, wherever they are, are urged to show solidarity with the city of Delft.

Let us consider the extent to which minister De Witte pursued a similar aim. At the beginning of his sermon, he immediately displays his own emotion:

[...] my ink is mixed with brackish tears, my hands are trembling with consternation and my pen is hardly able to produce letters to set on paper the misery that has overwhelmed the city and citizens of Delft.³⁸

This language of apparent emotional self-expression is also rhetorically informed. De Witte practices a well-known rhetorical technique for poets and actors from Horace's *Ars poetica*: to make me grieve, be first your anguish shown (*Ars Poetica*, vss. 102–103). The minister also frequently confronts his audience with lively emotional details of the population's deep sorrow and confusion, for instance:

The mother cried for her children [...] The children cried for their mothers, and both for their fathers and husbands, but they did not find them. That groaning, crying, weeping, lamenting, clutching of hands, pulling of hair – it is indescribable. How were the bleeding injured walking to the surgeons, as if they had survived a bloody battle, how did they fight for a blanket, a bed, yes, by pulling away a child, a patient [...].³⁹

He prescribes the appropriate emotional response to the misery in the form of rhetorical questions and a quotation from the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, and, quoting the prophet

again, he explicitly includes the hundreds of visitors which come to the city daily.⁴⁰ They too must feel closely involved with the suffering people:

Who has been able to see with a straight face the crushed, the wounded, and the people who lost their arms or their legs? Pregnant women were buried alive with their unborn children, old people buried under their roofs and the beds of their sleep have become their graves [...]. How sad it was to see protruding the heads, arms and legs of the dead from behind the beams and bricks. The infants are crushed and the sweet little girls who were playing on their mother's lap are destroyed, the schoolchildren are hit with death in this punishment of the Lord [...]. *My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city* (Lamentations of Jeremiah 2:11). At present the citizens of Delft speak as one with the sad city of Jerusalem to the hundreds of people who visit the city daily: *Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look around and see. Is there any suffering like the suffering that was inflicted on me, that the LORD brought on me in the day of his fierce anger?* (Lamentations of Jeremiah 1:12).⁴¹

However, the main emotion which enforces the lamentation and weeping is, at this stage of the minister's argument, not yet compassion but collective remorse. After having speculated as to the cause of the explosion and about God's providence – which finally leads to the conclusion that Delft, because of its sinfulness, has brought upon itself this punishment by God (pp. 14–30, cf. section 1) – De Witte starts to encourage his audience. He recalls the suffering that Job endured patiently and how God had blessed him in the end with redoubled prosperity. This biblical narrative thus offers its audience a convincing example of consolation and hope. Finally, the minister appeals to actual deeds of compassion in anticipation of the forthcoming collection. The keyword then is 'Christian compassion' ('Christelijcke mededoghenthey'), which implies the sense of shared suffering⁴² in a community of Christians:

You have heard of Job's patience and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is very merciful and a caretaker. Say never from desperation and weak faith 'how is it possible? How could our goods be saved? How could the city overcome that loss? Whence could these blessings come to us?' [...] You have already seen some practices of Christian compassion. Regents from cities in the neighbourhood have sent their surgeons to rescue the injured. And a few days later, we have received a proof of generosity when a good friend (who himself also had suffered considerable damage) paid the costs for twenty-five thousand roof-tiles to distribute them to the common people [...]. We hope and trust that this zeal [...] will stimulate many to give as much as they are able to the collection of 1 November, and even *beyond their ability* (2 Cor. 8.3).⁴³

Other cities, especially their rich citizens and magistrates are emphatically involved:

How this zeal, which started so exemplarily among our citizens [...], will then inspire other cities to follow. And just as your compassionate mayors recently supported the people of De Rijp with as much as the city's budget permitted, similarly, the good God will evoke compassionate hearts for you [...]. The Lord will unlock the hearts of the rich and the wealthy to compassion.⁴⁴

De Witte's emphasis on consolation, hope and deeds of 'Christian compassion' not only appeals to charitable practices. The minister's rhetoric also seems to reflect deep concerns about the breakdown of social cohesion, and this refers more generally to a discourse used by magistrates when implementing their measures in the aftermath of disasters.⁴⁵ Arousing compassion could serve as an antidote to the threat of social collapse.

So much for the emotional appeals in minister De Witte's response to the Delft explosion, one of the rhetorically charged voices in providential discourse on this specific disaster. De Witte's audience – the community of fellow Christians in Delft and other cities, regardless their social status – was persuaded to practise its collective compassion in the sense of a generous contribution to the city collection (according to individual capacity) or assisting the city by sending humanitarian aid.

Conclusion

By exploring the case of the Delft Thunderclap (1654), I have reconsidered providential discourse on early modern disasters. This yielded two insights. Firstly: the responses to this disaster were not limited to the peccatogenic perception. Providential discourse on the Delft disaster also included other religious outlooks. For instance, the belief in a merciful God, who, using His warning signs, reminded the people of Delft to live their lives on earth piously, always with the hereafter in their minds. Or, as Vondel's poem on the explosion demonstrated from its timeless and universal perspective, that in the light of this terrible catastrophe, divine providence can only be considered as fundamentally inscrutable.

Secondly, I have argued that providential discourse on the Delft disaster evoked emotion in its audience. The rhetorically charged emotional appeals in the responses sought social interconnectedness, for solidarity with the suffering people of the ruined city. Such an emotionally oriented exploration of responses to the Delft disaster could easily be extended to other disasters. However, in order to understand what is really behind their rhetoric of emotion, in the sense of social coping strategies, I would suggest that the vibrant field of the history of emotions be included in further research into disaster responses. In early modern times, the experience of feeling emotion is above all represented as a social process. Therefore, the concept of 'emotional community' postulated by Barbara Rosenwein⁴⁶ provides understanding of what goes on behind the rhetorical expressions of weeping and mourning which characterize so many early disaster responses. Rosenwein considers emotional communities to be 'largely the same as social communities' and 'almost by definition (since emotions tend to have a social, communicative role), an aspect of every social group'.⁴⁷ As Jan Plamper (2012) has argued, emotional communities can also be 'textual communities', in which people are interconnected through media, without ever having to meet each other.⁴⁸ Religious ministers such as Petrus de Witte, poets such as Vondel, and authors of similar responses to disasters in broadsheets and in pamphlets directed their emotional appeals to audiences understood in the sense of emotional communities shaped by their texts. They therefore contributed to a discourse against social disintegration and collapse in disastrous times.

Notes

- ¹ *Ellenden Klacht Van het Bedroefde Nederlandt. Sedert het Jaer 1672 tot den Aller-heyiligen Vloet van het Jaer 1675 / Lamentation by the grieving Netherlands since the year 1672 untill The All Saints Flood of the year 1675* (Amsterdam, Romeyn de Hooghe, 1675).
- ² See: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-79.309A> (print); <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-79.309B> (text).
- ³ Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 8–9.
- ⁴ Parker, 2013, p. 9.
- ⁵ See, for instance: Marie Luisa Allemeyer, *Fewersnoth und Flammenschwert. Stadtbrände in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Franz Mauelshagen, 'Disaster and Political Culture in Germany since 1500', in: Christof Mauch and Christian Pfister (eds.), *Natural disasters, cultural responses: Case Studies toward a Global Environmental History* (Lanham etc.: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 41–76 (pp. 58–61); Elaine Fulton, 'Acts of God: The Confessionalisation of Disaster in Reformation Europe', in: Andrea Janku, Gerrit J. Schenk and Franz Mauelshagen (eds.), *Historical Disaster in Context: Science, Religion and Politics* (New York, London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 54–74; Gerrit Jasper Schenk, 'Vormoderne Sattelzeit? Disastro, Katastrophe, Strafgericht – Worte, Begriffe und Konzepte für rapiden Wandel im langen Mittelalter', in: Carla Meyer, Katja-Patzel-Mattern, Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds.), 'Krisengeschichte(n): Krise' als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Beihefte Band 210 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), pp. 177–212. Cf. Adam Sundberg, 'Claiming the Past: History, Memory, and Innovation Following the Christmas Flood of 1717', in: *Environmental History* 20 (2015), pp. 238–261 (pp. 242–245).
- ⁶ Ansgar Nünning, 'Making Crises and Catastrophes – How Metaphors and Narratives shape their Cultural Life', in: Carsten Meiner, Kristin Veel (eds.), *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crisis* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 59–88. Series: Concepts for the Study of Culture; Michael Kempe, 'Mind the Next Flood' Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany', in: *The Medieval History Journal* 10 (2007), pp. 327–354; Michael Kempe, 'Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story and Natural Disasters in Early Modern Times', in: Michael Kempe and Christian Rohr (eds.), *Coping with the Unexpected – Natural Disasters and their Perception*. Special Issue of *Environment & History*, 9 (2003), pp. 151–171.
- ⁷ G. G. Kunz, 'Alsof het hemelgewelf barstte en de aardbodem openscheurde ...', in: H. L. Houtzager, G. G. Kunz a. o. (eds.), *Kruit en krijg. Delft als bakermat van het Prins Maurits Laboratorium TNO*. (Rodopi: Amsterdam, 1988), pp. 43–52; Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der Stadt Delft (...)* (Delft, gedrukt by Arnold Bon, 1667), pp. 622–634.
- ⁸ *Delfschen Donder-slaghe Ofte Korte aensprake aen de bedroefde gemeente van Delft. By een schricklijck oordeel Godts besocht [...]*. Delft, Ian Pietersz, Waelpot, 1654. Other editions: Rotterdam, 1654; Utrecht, 1654 (two editions); Amsterdam, 1655. I refer to the edition Amsterdam, 1655 (by Gerrit Willemszoon Doornick, Boeckverkooper [...]).
- ⁹ De Witte, 1655, pp. 8, 9.
- ¹⁰ De Witte, 1655, p. 21.
- ¹¹ De Witte, 1655, pp. 30, 31.
- ¹² H. Bruno in De Witte, 1655, p. [96].
- ¹³ http://www.oudhoorn.nl/biografie/biografie_henricus_bruno.php
- ¹⁴ H. Bruno in De Witte, 1655, p. [96].
- ¹⁵ 'Op het Laster-rym gestelt achter den Delfschen Donderslaghe, uitgegeven by P. De Witt, predicant tot Delft [...] Tegen-gift', in: Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der stad Delft [...]* (Delft, 1667), pp. 632, 633.
- ¹⁶ See Arnout van Geluwe, *een lekenpolemist aan het front van de Contrareformatie*. Themanummer *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis*, 14 (2011), No. 2.
- ¹⁷ Arnout van Geluwe, *Het Goddelijck Trompet over Hollandt ofte Grouwelycken Hollantschen Donderslaghe [...]* (Roermond, Iasper du Pré, 1655), pp. 5–7.
- ¹⁸ Van Geluwe, pp. 9, 10.
- ¹⁹ Jan Philipsz. Scabaelje, *Historisch Verhael Van het wonderlick en schrickelick opspringen van 't Magasyn-Huys, Voorgevallen op den 12. October 1654, Binnen Delft [...]*. Amsterdam, Gedrukt by Tymon Houthaack [...], 1654.
- ²⁰ Scabaelje, 1654, p. 8; see also pp. 6, 7 and his 'Aen de Leser'.
- ²¹ Scabaelje, 1654, p. 13.
- ²² Scabaelje, 1654, p. 13.
- ²³ Scabaelje, 1654, p. 13, 14.
- ²⁴ About him and his brother Dierick: Piet Visser, *Broeders in de geest. De doopsgezinde bijdragen van Dierick en Jan Phlipsz. Scabaelje tot de Nederlandse stichtelijke literatuur in de zeventiende eeuw*. Proefschrift Universiteit van Amsterdam (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1988), 2 dln. With a summary in English.
- ²⁵ *Op het Onweder van 's Lants Bussekruid te Delft. Plurima Mortis Imago*. Voor de weduwe

- van Abraham de Wees [...], 1654. I will quote from *De werken van Vondel*. Deel 5, 1645–1656: http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/vondoo1deweo5_01/vondoo1deweo5_01_0192.php
- ²⁶ See Luuc Kooijmans, *Vriendschap en de kunst van het overleven in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*. (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1997), pp. 113–131.
- ²⁷ On this story Vondel inspired his tragedy *Salomoneus*, conceived earlier in 1654.
- ²⁸ Vondel, 1654, vss. 57, 58.
- ²⁹ Vondel expressed the same vision in a poem on the fire of Aachen in 1656: *Lament on the ruin of the imperial city of Aachen* ('Klaghte Op den ondergank der Rijkstede Aken' (Amsterdam, Voor de weduwe van Abraham de Wees, 1656). See: M. A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, 'Vondel als uitlokter van een polemiek over de Brand van Aken (1656)', in: Herman Vekeman & Herbert van Uffelen (eds.), *Jetzt kehrt Ich an den Rhein* (Cologne: Runge, 1987), pp. 270–283.
- ³⁰ Schabaelje 1654, p. 14 [v], [15r]; Van Bleyswijck 1667, pp. 627, 628. The reformed poet Jan Six van Chandelier was possibly triggered by the fact that Vondel had addressed his poem to the anti-Orangist mayor Huydecoper and, consequently, had not mentioned that William of Orange's tomb in the Nieuwe Kerk was not damaged (contrary to the church). Van Chandelier's poem *Buskruijs donder en bliksem te Delft* (1654) has been read as a critical political response to Vondel's poem; see: Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen en Willemien B. De Vries, *Zelfbeeld in gedichten. Brieven over de poëzie van Jan Six van Chandelier (1620–1695)* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007), pp. 163–165.
- ³¹ Vondel, 1654, vss 49, 50.
- ³² Schabaelje, 1654, pp. 10, 11.
- ³³ De Witte, 1655, pp. 12, 13; 39, 46 (etcetera).
- ³⁴ 'Voor-reden ende Opdraght Aen [...] Mijn Heeren den Bailliu, Schout, Borge-meester, Schepenen ende Stadt-houders der Stede van Roesselare in Vlaenderen [...]' (followed by personal addresses to each officer, including his full name and title), in: A. van Geluwe, *Het Goddelijck Trompet over Hollant [...]* (Roermond, Iaspar du Pré, 1655), pp. 2–[*11].
- ³⁵ *Klaghte Op den ondergank der Rijkstede Aken* (1656) and *Jammerklaght over de gruwsame verwoesting van Londen* (1666) were both written by Vondel. See note 29 and http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/vondoo1deweo10_01/vondoo1deweo10_01_0051.php. The anonymous *Londeners Lamentation* (1666) was reprinted in: Robert Arnold Aubin, *London in Flames, London in Glory. Poems on the fire and rebuilding of London 1666–1709* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1943), pp. 84–88.
- ³⁶ 'Lamentatoria tum calamitates exponit et amplificat, quo alios ad misericordiam concitet: tum odium ejus gignit, a quo quis malum accepit: tum metum parit in auditore, quia ostendit, quae uni contigerunt, aliis quoque accidere posse', in: G. J. Vossius, *Commentatorium rhetoricorum (...) libri sex*. Leiden, 1630, Volume 1, p. 418.
- ³⁷ Schabaelje, 1654, p. 10.
- ³⁸ De Witte, 1655, p. 3.
- ³⁹ De Witte, 1655, pp. 7, 8.
- ⁴⁰ Could the Amsterdam mayor Joan Huydecoper, to whom Vondel writes 'Now you looked, her at Holland's soil, // Vesuvius in its mouth // In Delft [...]' (see section 1), have been one of the many visitors De Witte is referring to?
- ⁴¹ De Witte, 1655, pp. 11–14.
- ⁴² Cf. Marta Nussbaum, 'Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion', in: *Social Philosophy and Policy* 13 (1996), 1, pp. 27–58.
- ⁴³ De Witte, 1655, pp. 35–37. Van Bleyswijck (1667, see note 7) also mentions the collection and concludes that 'many have displayed great generosity out of Christian compassion' (p. 631).
- ⁴⁴ De Witte, 1655, pp. 37–39.
- ⁴⁵ See, for instance: Keith Wrightson, *Ralph Tailor's Summer: A Scribener, his City and the Plague* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 9, 47, 99, 160–161.
- ⁴⁶ Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Problems and Methods in the History of Emotion', in: *Passions in Context*, *International Journal for the History and Theory of the Emotions* 1 (2010), 1 ('Writing Emotions'), pp. 1–31 (http://www.passionsincontext.de/uploads/media/01_Rosenwein.pdf); Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 67–74; Herman Roodenburg and Catrien Santing (eds.), *Batavian Phlegm? The Dutch and their Emotions in Pre-Modern Times*. Special Issue of *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 129 (2014), 2, *passim*.
- ⁴⁷ Rosenwein, 2010, pp. 11, 12.
- ⁴⁸ Plamper (2012), p. 69. Cf. Rosenwein, 2010, pp. 11–12: 'A textual community [...] may sometimes be the nucleus of an "emotional community"'.
⁴⁹ See: <http://www.marijkemeijerdrees.nl>.

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